

Halo: Silent Sword

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Summary: When a covenant ship nears the human planet of Jericho VII, it is the mission of 3 Spartans to stop it from finding the planet, and prolong the inevitable battle for its existence.

1. Chapter 1

****CHAPTER**

ONE**Â-

****0200 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis System, Jericho VII UNSC Naval Command Center****

'Plague'****

Spartan 68 walked down one of a thousand identical corridors in the building. He knew where he was going though, and he dwelled more on the thought of his next mission than on where to go. He had only arrived in at the command center five hours ago, all of which he had spent sleeping.

He didn't know how long he would have to be awake during his mission. He had gone without sleep for periods of three or four days before without so much as a yawn, but it never hurt to be prepared. Battle had taught him that. You never knew when there would be a twist, something unexpected. You never knew when your entire strategy or plan would have to be changed to fit the new context of your situation.

As he passed UNSC personnel in the hallway they all either stared or looked away. He was used to it though. Not many people had ever seen a Spartan fully armored in a MJOLNIR cybernetic battle suit.

He took a right and came to the armory. He entered the small room, and did not hesitate to pick up his sniper rifle. He had modified it to his liking with extra features such as a third, 15x zoom level,

and enhanced night vision. Both had come in handy before, and he had grown quite attached to it. It was also equipped with all the basic features such as a smart-link scope that fed video to his HUD, and 14.5mm armor-piercing rounds.

Second he picked up an MA5B assault rifle, which would come in handy if he ended up in any close range skirmishes. The MA5B was the standard primary weapon issued to every marine for all sorts of close combat. It was a decent weapon, and he appreciated it for being extremely easy to use and carry, with an excellent rate of fire. It fired 7.62mm armor piercing rounds, and had a number of features on the integrated computer, including a digital compass.

Before leaving the armory, he made sure to pick up an M6D pistol. It was a small handgun, but it packed a huge punch. Capable of 2x smart-link magnification and firing 12.7mm semi-armor piercing, high-explosive rounds, many marines used it as their primary weapon rather than a sidearm.

With that, Spartan 68 grabbed a number of frag grenades, two remote detonated sticky bombs, and some extra ammo, and left the armory. As he walked back down the hall toward the launch bay, he hoped his teammates would get there soon.

As though his thought had triggered it, another Spartan turned the corner right then, heading toward the armory. Although he also was fully covered in the same cybernetic armor, he recognized him as Spartan 23, otherwise known as 'Brute' for his love of explosives. Brute was one of his companions for the mission, and he was glad to have him.

He knew he himself could operate explosive weaponry about twice as well as a normal marine, and that was terrible by Spartan standards. He wasn't worried though, because with his talent for sniping, and Brute's passion for blowing things up, he knew they'd make a great team.

As Spartan 23 grew nearer, he opened a com-link channel, "Brute, you've got to be in the launch bay in three minutes, you'd better hurry in the armory."

"I know." Brute replied, "I won't be long, Plague."

Spartan 68 closed the link, and inside his helmet the corners of his mouth twitched slightly (the Spartan equivalent of a silent chuckle) as he was reminded of his nickname. He was called 'Plague' for his tendency to take out many enemies in a quick succession with his sniper rifle, often stealing his teammate's kills.

Having walked the short distance to the launch bay, he touched the nearby button to open the large door, and impatiently waited as its panels retreated into the wall. Before it was completely open, he stepped through into the gigantic room that was the launch bay. The ceiling was probably about 100 feet above him, and catwalks stretched here and there near the sides of the room. The wall to his left had openings for ship departures at every docking station.

Although the bay was only wide enough to fit one ship, it seemed to stretch on forever in front of him, allowing a great many ships to land side by side, all along the length of the bay. Plague set off

down the row of ships to find Pelican Tango 23, the designated craft for his mission.

'Brute'****

Brute continued down the hall toward the armory after passing Plague. He knew Plague was his commander, but no matter how high or low anyone's rank was, all Spartans treated each other as equals, no exceptions. They had all been together since childhood, and each one knew every other just as well as they knew themselves.

They could communicate without saying a word, and know what another was thinking without so much as a glance in their direction. They were Spartans, the most advanced military force in the universe, and they always worked together. Each and every one of them knew what the key to their success was. It wasn't their genetically altered strength or reflexes. It was every single one of the other Spartans.

Brute entered the armory with that thought in mind, and began the quick task of collecting his weapons. He first grabbed his beloved rocket launcher. His modifications made it much better than a standard infantry rocket. It launched the explosive shells nearly 1.5 times as fast, and could also track moving targets to a certain extent, if he so desired.

His second weapon was his shotgun. Most marines, and most Spartans used the standard MA5B assault rifle as their primary close range weapon, but Brute would never take one into combat. He much preferred the power and strength of the M90 8 gauge shotgun. He had two theories about combat. One was that you could kill anything if your blast radius was big enough. The second was that if you fired enough bullets simultaneously, you're bound to hit your target. The shotgun met the second theory perfectly.

As a sidearm, Brute picked up the standard M6D pistol. That was one weapon he could agree with people on. It may be small, but he knew the kind of power it contained.

Lastly, he grabbed a few grenades, sticky bombs, and extra ammo, and headed out of the armory, and down the hall to the launch bay to join Plague. As he walked away, he saw no sign of the third Spartan assigned to the mission, Spartan 56, also known as 'Wrench'.

Wrench was the only mechanic of all the Spartans. He was just as good as any other in combat, but his real specialization was in vehicular repair and modification. He had his own customized warthog and pelican, both of which they would be taking on the mission. Wrench was probably already at the pelican, anxious to get going.

Brute was at the door to the launch bay within a minute and a few seconds later he was in the bay, the door finishing opening behind him. Without hesitation, he walked toward docking station 29, at which Wrench's pelican was docked. He could see Plague waiting for him there, examining his sniper rifle. Next to him stood Wrench, waiting impatiently for the third Spartan.

'Wrench'****

Wrench was at the docking station ready to go five minutes before

Plague got there. Now he was walking around his pelican making final adjustments to his precious creation. His warthog was strapped on under the pelican's troop bay.

This mission was going to be the first time he really got to test out his vehicles in actual combat situations. He wasn't going to let any little thing blow it. He had already double checked everything to make sure it all worked, and was about to triple check it, when he realized he had not checked his weapons.

His weapon set was very basic. He carried the standard MA5B, and a simple M6D pistol. He carried no third weapon, and instead used the space for extra ammo. He didn't have a specialty in fighting, so he had taken weapons that were good all around for almost any situation. Besides, his teammates could always back him up in a tight situation.

Just as he finished checking his pistol, Plague walked up, sniper rifle over his shoulder, obviously ready to go. As he came near, Wrench opened a com-link channel.

"Where's Brute?" he asked, "He should be here by now."

"Don't worry." answered Plague, "He was just going into the armory as I left. He should be here any minute."

"Good" Wrench replied.

It didn't take even a minute for Brute to arrive at the pelican. They were all ready, and the only thing left to do was the briefing. Plague already knew what they were doing, so he quickly told the others.

"We don't have much time for this mission, so lets get going as quickly as possible." He said. "Basically there's a covenant ship that has entered the sector. We can't be sure what it's doing here, but it's probably a scout."

"At this point there's no question about whether or not they're going to find this planet, just a question of how soon. We want to delay this as long as possible and give the planet more time to prepare its defenses."

"Our only hope at this time is to destroy the ship, but if we use the navy of this planet, they will almost certainly send more ships immediately. What we are going to do is go to that ship in this pelican and find a way on board. We've got to destroy the engines, and crash it on the nearby planet, Jericho III. Right now, that planet is blocking this one from their sensors. We've got to get there and crash it before it finds Jericho VII."

That was a lot to stomach, even for a Spartan. However, if either of the others were surprised by the mission they didn't show it.

"Sir," said Wrench, "if we have a time limit, we'd better get going now."

"Exactly. Here are the coordinates." said Plague handing Wrench a small data chip, "Now let's get going."

"Well," said Plague.

"We've got to attract their fire."

"What!"

"Well, the only times they let down their shields are when they've just made a slip space jump, or when they fire." Explained Wrench, "Since they didn't just jump here, we've only got one option."

"How are we going to attract their attention?" asked Plague, "We should be in range of their radar now, but they're not firing."

"Well," said Wrench, "I've been jamming their radar signals, and sending back false ones. They can't see us. All I've got to do is stop, and they'll be all over us."

Plague turned to Brute, who was obviously listening, though he was perfectly still. Plague raised his hand to chest level, and extended his index finger, the Spartan signal to ask if another is ready.

Brute nodded ever so slightly, but Plague saw it. "Hit it." He said.

'**Brute**'

Brute was ready for anything, though he grew increasingly nervous since he knew his life would be in danger before he had any control over the situation. Of course, like Plague, he trusted Wrench with his life, but was nervous anyway. The only Spartan who was completely comfortable with space travel was Wrench himself.

Brute picked up a view screen and switched it to fore camera. He could see the approaching ship and for some reason took comfort in it. He knew he would be fine once there, but he had to survive this first. Brute noticed that the plasma cannons along the ship had begun to glow. After a few seconds, two fired.

The pelican lurched quickly to avoid the plasma, and get closer to the ship. Those two started charging again, but in the mean time the others began firing in a wave. The fire almost never let up. It was a constant, deadly game with plasma bolts.

They were now close enough to the ship that it filled the view screen. Brute wasn't sure how well they could dodge plasma at this range, but trusted Wrench, and so didn't do anything. The plasma kept coming, and despite the disadvantage they were at, Wrench continued dodging them. Brute saw many coming very close though, and he hoped they were almost there.

However good a pilot Wrench was though, he wasn't perfect. A sudden blast shook the ship and it began rolling toward the Covenant vessel. Brute opened a channel to Wrench immediately.

"What was that?" he asked, although he already knew.

"Plasma bolt hit the right wing and knocked it completely off. We're spiraling toward the ship now. I'm struggling for control. If we hit

their shields, we'll be deflected into space." Wrench replied.

This was exactly what Brute was worried about. He was trapped in this ship and his life was in the hands of a pilot who was struggling just to maintain control. Faintly, he felt something he had not felt for a long time. He felt fear.

Wrench cut the link, or maybe it broke itself. Brute didn't care.

Slowly, Brute could feel the ship stop spinning. Wrench must have been gaining control, at least over the spiral. He wondered how long it would take to get enough control to avoid the shields, and how much time they had.

'**Wrench**'

Wrench had never had a harder piloting experience in his life. The ship was nearly impossible to control, and he estimated about thirty seconds before they hit the shields. If he didn't find a way out of this fast, it would be mission over and failed.

He had managed to stop the spiral, but he had no control over the engines at all. He couldn't brake the pelican, and he couldn't turn her. He was helpless.

He must have had only had ten seconds left, but he still didn't give up. He had to find a way to steer clear of the shields. There was always a way. He could find it, or fail. He couldn't fail.

Suddenly, it came to him. It was obvious. He checked the ship's thrusters. They were intact and ready to be operated at 50. It would be enough. He activated them and pushed the ship up, narrowly missing the shields.

However, the limited power of the thrusters could not pull up away from the ship. Instead they skimmed along the shields, only a few yards away.

Wrench noticed that they were still heading slightly down, and would still hit the shields soon if action was not taken. He checked all thrusters and engines, and all were working to their full extent to keep the ship up. There was nothing left to do. He had spent his last bit of luck.

However, he still tried. He could think of nothing. He checked all around the cockpit for something he could do. Still, there was nothing. He switched his view screen to aft camera and saw the ship fire another round of plasma.

Acting upon instinct, he reached up and shut off the thrusters. The ship dropped through the shields while they were down, and they were safe. Wrench felt relief, and reached up to activate the thrusters again, to keep them from hitting the ship itself now that they were through the shields.

The thruster didn't activate. They had burned out from the long period of use. It hadn't been more than a half a minute, but the thrusters were for quick, short bursts used for minor course correction, they couldn't withstand extended periods of use more than

a few seconds.

There was nothing he could do to save the ship. He could see that now. There was only one thing they could do. There was no other option. He opened a com link to his teammates and ordered them to prepare to bail out. They didn't question him, and he cut the link.

He couldn't believe what he was doing. He had never even used his pelican on a mission before, and now he was letting it be destroyed. He reminded himself that he had no choice, and let the thought go. He couldn't dwell on such things. He had to focus on the mission.

He stood up, with certain difficulty, then was slammed into his seat again as the pelican collided with the Covenant ship. There was then a continuous scraping noise, and Wrench could just imagine his pelican sliding across the hull of the enemy ship.

He got up again, and opened the door to the troop bay. Plague and Brute were on their feet and ready. Wrench hit the button to open the troop bay door, and it began retreating into the ceiling.

He could see as it opened, the hull of the Covenant ship racing by. Plasma cannons, and other features zoomed past as sparks flew into the air. The pelican face backward, so that the objects came towards them then past the drop ship.

Plague went first. He grabbed the top of the troop bay entrance, and pulled himself up onto the top of the ship. Brute went next, and Wrench followed reluctantly. As he climbed onto the top, he saw Plague standing above the cockpit, ready to jump.

Wrench came up the rest of the way, and slowly made his way to the other end of the ship. Plague didn't bother opening a link or trying to communicate anything to the other two. They know what he was feeling, and he them.

Plague turned, and jumped off the pelican, followed quickly by Brute. Wrench looked down at the cockpit window and for a second he hesitated, but no longer. He looked up, and jumped.

3. Chapter 3

****CHAPTER**

THREE**Â-

****0240 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis System, Covenant Ship near Jericho III****

'Plague'****

As Plague jumped off the nose of the pelican everything seemed to be speeding past him, yet moving in slow motion. He had the feeling that time was slowing down, yet racing at the same time. It was the feeling only experience by Spartans. With their fast reflexes, they could see things slow down, yet adrenaline still pumped through their system, and so everything also seemed to move more quickly. One of the other Spartans had once called it "Spartan time". That was the phrase everyone now used.

In this Spartan time, Plague suddenly realized the seriousness of his predicament. Wrench's pelican was totaled and so they had no way off the covenant ship. Also, they had no way in, and every enemy on the ship knew they were there. It didn't take a genius to figure out that they were in a pretty tight spot. He was a Spartan though, and Spartans were always in tight spots, and they always got out. It was their duty. It was their Job.

Plague could see the hull of the Covenant ship speeding toward him. In a matter of moments, he crashed into it and began sliding just as the pelican had. He however, could stop himself. He activated the electro-magnets built into his armor's boots. Immediately he began slowing down, and within five seconds, he came to a stop. Adrenaline surged throughout his body, and he could feel his heart beating fast and hard. A few seconds later, he was joined by his teammates.

Plague opened a com channel, "You guys OK?"

"Fine," replied Brute.

"I'm OK," said Wrench, "but my pelican..."

The three Spartans looked in the direction of the doomed drop ship. It was hardly visible in the distance. After a second though, it hit one of the ship's turrets, and was engulfed in a giant ball of purple plasma. Wrench was terribly disappointed at the destruction of his own vehicular creation, but nothing got in the way of a Spartans mission... Ever.

"Wrench," asked Plague, "how did you plan on getting inside the ship?"

"Through the docking bay," he replied, "it's the only easy way, and the only one that would fit a pelican."

"Good." said Plague. "We'll try to board the ship there. Hopefully they won't have the barriers up."

It was a bit of a run to the docking bay. It was probably about a kilometer across the ship's hull to get there. The Spartans covered the distance in about 3 minutes. They were unmatched in their speed, as they were with every other aspect of combat.

Unfortunately, the barriers were up when they got there, and who knew how long it would be before they opened them. Hours? Days? They couldn't wait that long. They were running out of time.

'**Brute**'

"Let me handle this." said Brute, stepping forward. In his hand he held two sticky bombs. That wasn't enough power to get through the barrier itself. In fact, almost nothing but plasma fire could take down one of the Covenant's complex energy barriers, but Brute knew what he was doing.

He planted the charges both near the corner of the semi-transparent shielding, about where the generators should have been. If he could

destroy two of the generators, he could open up a hole for them. The down side was that it would attract attention. The Spartans were ready though. They were always ready.

The three stepped away from the charges, and Brute prepared to blow them. The button was pressed and after only a moment's delay, the bombs blew. When the smoke cleared, which it did slowly and awkwardly in the 0 g's, they could see that indeed the entire corner of the barrier was gone.

By planting the explosive in those spots, Brute had forced the generators to drop the shield in the corner. The space was plenty large enough to get through, but the Spartans weren't worried about that at the moment. They were too busy scanning it for hostiles. After a few seconds, a single Jackal stuck out its head and looked around. It didn't have a chance to see them before its head attracted one of Plague's sniper bullets.

There were a few more seconds of nothing, and then a stream of Covenant began pouring out of the hole. Elites, Jackals, and Grunts, all enclosed in their space suits, ran headlong in the Spartans screaming silently in the vacuum and firing. The grunts were going crazy. They ran around waving their weapons in the air, stopping here and there to fire, and usually getting killed a few seconds later.

The elites, dodged a lot of the Spartans' fire, but one by one they fell under the powerful surge of firepower rushing at them. Jackals were using their shields to their great advantage, and became nearly as much of a threat as the elites.

The Spartans however, obviously had the upper hand. Brute was standing right out front with his shotgun, firing repetitively over and over. Wrench stood to his left and slightly back, using his pistol to kill many of the grunts and jackals. Plague crouched behind them, firing his sniper rifle into the crowd of Covenant, taking out many of the larger opponents with single shots to the head.

Together they were unstoppable. None of them took any serious damage during the entire battle, which lasted about two minutes. The Covenant kept pouring out of the hole like water flowing from a fountain. Finally they came to an end. They were all dead, and no more came.

Brute crept cautiously forward and peered into the hole. The entire docking bay was empty now. It seemed that all the Covenant had come out to fight and die. They would rather die fighting than retreat and live to fight again. Brute had no problem with that, he was glad to fulfill that wish.

'**Wrench**'

** "***We'd better load up a drop ship if we're planning to evac when this thing blows. We'll need to get out quick." said Wrench, "Plague, you jam the doors, and Brute grab me a couple of ghosts. We may need them if we're going to have to mop up any survivors on the planet."

Wrench wasn't supposed to be in charge of the mission. That was Plague's job. He knew that none of them cared though. When they

weren't in combat, they respected the higher ranks just like anyone should. In combat hover, rank was forgotten. They were a team. No one lead, no one followed. They didn't need to. They knew how to work together, and they did it well. That was all that mattered.

Wrench found a ladder to the second story where he could board the Covenant drop ship that was docked there. He entered one of the troop bays. He had seen them the troop bays before, but then he continued to the cockpit. It was nothing like anything he had ever seen.

Of course all the writing and symbols were alien, but the entire layout and everything was different. There was no window to the outside. There was only a view screen. The only light in the cockpit was dim, and Wrench couldn't tell where it came from. Computer panels lined the view screen, and various places on the wall elsewhere. It was complicated, but he was sure he would be able to handle it when the time came.

After a few minutes of looking around, he left the ship and climbed back to the first floor to help Brute load the ghosts. The ship didn't use cables like a human drop ship. Instead, it used a small anti-gravity field to hold the ghost in place. A few minutes later, they had it figured out, and the first ghost was loaded.

Brute had just gone to get a second one when Plague's voice came over the com, "We've got company. Invisible Elites... Who knows how many."

A few seconds later, there was the hiss of opening doors on all three levels of the bay. Plague obviously hadn't yet had the chance to jam all of them. The Spartans could handle any enemy supposedly, but without knowing where that enemy was, the challenge was remarkably harder. They could win though. They had to.

Wrench turned away from the ghost he had loaded, and leveled his assault rifle at the door. He didn't see anything, but fired a small burst into it. He hit two elites. Their camouflage broke for a second as the projectiles passed through the invisible coating. It was only for a second though, and before he could fire another burst, they had moved and were gone.

Brute had already fired a rocket though. It hit right in front of the open door, and sent three elites flying, dead. There were obviously more because a second later plasma fire erupted behind Brute, and he took a number of shots in the back. His shields drained and he became vulnerable.

Brute rolled to the side and behind a purple storage crate. Wrench fired a three round burst into the air where the plasma had come from and hit the elite's camo generator. It was now completely visible, and Brute took that opportunity to peek from behind the crate and hit it in the stomach with a round from his shotgun. The elite doubled over clutching its middle, letting out one last dying scream.

That was all of them on the first level, but Plague was on the second level. Wrench opened a com channel, "Plague, we got all of them on our level, how are you doing up there?" There was silence. "Plague? Plague?" Still, there was only silence.

4. Chapter 4

****CHAPTER**

FOUR**Â-

****0600 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis System, Covenant Ship near Jericho III****

'Plague**'**

Plague closed the com channel and immediately leveled his sniper rifle at the now open door. He fire two shots into it and they both found targets, exposing them for a second before they would vanish again. However, a second was all that Plague needed. He fired another shot into one elite's head and it fell. He turned to the other, but it rolled away and disappeared.

Plague took out his assault rifle and took a few steps back. He didn't want any of the aliens to make it around him and get a shot at his backside. He saw a shimmer of movement to his left and gave it a quick three round burst. An elite appeared, and Plague opened fire. He had let out no more than about seven rounds when an invisible force hit him in the side.

He nearly fell over, but put his foot back to stabilize himself. Without hesitation, he began pouring bullets into the air where he knew the elite must have been. He hit it, and was exposed. The elite tried to raise its plasma rifle, but Plague continued firing and after a second the elite gave a cry and collapsed.

However, the elite he had shot earlier was now firing. Small plasma spheres sped toward him and hit his armor, causing the shield to flare up. The plasma stunned him for a second, and by the time he could bring his rifle up, his shields were depleted. He rolled to the side, crouched and fired at the elite from a different angle.

After a few rounds to the chest, plague angled his rifle up, and fired a burst into the alien's head. It died and fell to the ground, and as it did Plague's shields began to recharge. It didn't do him much good, because before they were half way up, another elite appeared out of thin air, firing its weapon and running straight toward him.

The enemy launched itself into the air and before Plague could move or aim, it came down on top of him, knocking his rifle out of his hand and across the floor. The elite slammed its plasma rifle in Plague's visor and pulled the trigger. Energy exploded across the surface of his face plate, and his shield once again drained.

Fortunately for Plague just as this happened, the energy weapon overheated. Blue steam poured out of the sides of the rifle, and he reached up and grabbed it. He pushed it up and hit the alien in the face with it. It fell back onto the floor and disappeared again. Plague stood up. He had the gun.

He aimed at the ground where he knew the alien was, but before he could squeeze the firing mechanism, he was attacked yet again. This time he was hit in the back, and he flew forward, right on top of the elite he had knocked over a second ago. It appeared under him and let

out a muffled yell as it was literally crushed to death by the massive MJOLNIR armor.

Plague rolled over, and saw a shimmer in the air above him. He fired the plasma rifle, which he was still holding, and the elite became visible as it flew down toward him. Landing on top of him, it pulled its fist back and struck Plague's helmet. He heard static then silence as it broke his comm. unit.

Plague returned the blow with two quick jabs to the enemy's stomach. It hesitated a moment, recovering from the hits, and in that time Plague managed to reach up and rip off the alien's camo unit. The elite quickly grabbed at the Spartan's stolen weapon. He held on, and they both struggled to win it.

They began rolling over the floor toward the drop to the first story. It wouldn't hurt either of them, but it would complicate the fight. They came to a stop right at the edge, with Plague on the bottom, and his enemy on top. Plague's head hung over the side of the floor. The elite couldn't beat him at hand to hand combat though. He pulled one hand away from the weapon, and the elite took the opportunity to grab it away from him.

The alien though, had overlooked the Spartan's other hand. It came up with lightning speed and hit him in the side. The enemy groaned with pain, and Plague forced it to roll over, so that he would be on top. The elite's head now hung over the edge, and before it could see what was happening, he had pulled back his fist and delivered a punch straight to its face. The elite's head was knocked off, and it tumbled to the first floor below where Wrench and Brute were desperately trying to reach him through the comm. system.

'**Brute**'

Brute was yelling for Plague over the comm. when the elite's head fell from above and landed a few feet in front of him, bouncing twice and coming to rest at his feet. Brute looked up and saw Plague withdraw from the edge of the second story. A few seconds later, he was back, assault rifle in hand.

Without a moment's hesitation he jumped the short distance to the first floor, landing in a crouched position and one hand on the ground between his feet for support.

"Worried about me?" he said over the external speakers.

"No," replied Brute, "not really."

"We figured you could take care of yourself." Said Wrench, but he knew he couldn't fool Plague.

Plague remained silent for a moment then said, "The elite ripped apart my comm. system. I got him back though."

"We can see that," said Brute, gazing down at the head by his feet.

Wrench however, looked at the situation a little more seriously. He said, "You know that this means we won't be able to talk privately any

more. We can't be as stealthy."

"You're right," said Brute, "Very well, hand signals only from now on."

Plague and Wrench acknowledged this with slight nods. The Spartans didn't need to talk to communicate tactical information during battle. They had worked out a very complex system of hand signals known only to them. Not even their trainers had figured them out. It was one of the things that made them indefinitely the most powerful fighting force in the history of the UNSC.

Brute pointed to his wrist where he would have worn a watch, and made a quick circular movement with his finger, then pointed at the ghost they hadn't yet loaded.

He saw Plague and Wrench's acknowledgement lights blink on to show they understood. Less than two minutes later, the other ghost was loaded, and they were ready to make their way to the engine room.

Unfortunately, a covenant ship had never been captured, or in any other way been mapped out, so the Spartans really had no idea where they were supposed to go. However, they did know in what direction the engines were, so they left the launch bay through a door in that general direction.

After a few turns, they were all lost, so they made their way back to the launch bay and started again, using multiple nav points to help them plot where they had come from. Before long, they came upon a room full of holo panels and covenant computers. Brute stepped up to one and pressed one of the calligraphic symbols. A new screen appeared with even more alien writing.

Brute couldn't understand any of it, so he activated the translation software in his suit. It wasn't very developed and only knew parts of a few dialects, but it could record information and learn new things so that in time it would become better.

It was able to translate a hand full of the symbols, including one that read "map". Brute pressed it, and it opened a map of the ship. He looked over it for a few seconds then spotted the engine room near the back of the ship. He figured that the map might come in handy, so he downloaded it to his helmet's memory. Plague and Wrench were examining the other computers when he turned around.

He pointed to the computer he had been working at, spread out his hands, palms to the ground, then pointed to his helmet's memory slot. They nodded and followed him out of the room.

Brute erased all of the previous nav points they had placed, sent a copy of the file to his teammates then placed a new nav point at the engine room. Two acknowledgement light blinked on, and the three Spartans headed down the corridor toward the new destination.

'**Wrench**'

It took them the better part of 20 minutes to find the room. The nav point easily showed them where it was, but they constantly had to

reference the covenant map in order to find their way. The ship was very complex, Wrench thought. A human ship was laid out so that every part was easily accessible from every other part. The covenant ship however, seemed to be designed a little differently. There were a lot of hallways, many of which seemed unnecessary.

When they finally made it, they were on the second story of a four story room. It was completely open, and had catwalks that seemed suspended in mid air. No supports were visible. The engine was also amazing. It spanned all four levels, and was a rough cylinder. It had many places where view screens or computers were sticking out, or odd control panels with alien writing. Wrench knew that the UNSC scientists would love to examine it. Too bad they had to destroy it.

Wrench himself had never seen a covenant engine. He would have loved to look it over carefully, but he knew they were short on time. They would have to blow it, and hope to catch a different engine sometime later.

He signaled for the others to watch for visitors while he went to one of the holo panels extruding from the engine. As he walked across a catwalk toward the large machine, he scanned the area for hostiles with his rifle. There were none.

He took the last few steps to the panel, and began hacking into the computer using the hardly helpful intrusion software built into his armor. It took him a few minutes, but he got in, and he began looking for a way to destroy the massive ship. There didn't seem to be any way to accomplish it.

He did find the engine's self destruct command, but accessing it would take half a million different codes and passwords. Hacking it would take so long that it would be faster to destroy the ship by shooting it with a pistol.

He was searching the files for a third time, when he accidentally opened the engine blueprints. He almost closed them, but then decided that they might prove useful. He looked over them for a minute or two and soon found what he was looking for. There were two access hatches to the engine's inner parts. There were codes required, but they were surprisingly simpler than the others.

Wrench had it hacked in five minutes and just as he finished two hatches on the first and fourth floor opened on the outside of the engine. He signaled for Plague to take the fourth floor one while he climbed down to the first. Wrench lightly touched his fingers to the other palm then curled that hand into a fist.

Plague nodded and made for the fourth floor hatch. Wrench made his way to the first floor, and entered the small hole in the engines side. The inside was extremely complex. Pipes and wires ran everywhere, and there were at least ten different tanks holding different substances.

Wrench didn't pause for a moment to look at any of it though. He just pulled out a sticky bomb, rigged it, and stuck it to the inside wall of the engine. Without any hesitation, he backed out of the hatch, and closed the door. It locked into place. A few second later, he heard Plague's door do the same.

No sooner had he begun to climb back to the second floor, than Brute yelled over his external speakers, "Hunters! Fourth floor!"

Wrench looked up, and saw six of the behemoth soldiers standing on catwalks high above him. Every one of them had a charged fuel rod gun. One let his loose, and it came straight down on Wrench.

5. Chapter 5

****CHAPTER**

FIVE**Â-

****0700 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis System, Covenant Ship near Jericho III****

'Plague'****

Plague looked on, unable to help, as the giant ball of green plasma raced toward his friend. He was only able to stand and watch as Wrench crouched, bracing for impact, and the projectile hit, creating a large cloud of green smoke. Plague was worried about Wrenches fate, but hesitated no longer to see the outcome of the blast. The mission was more important. His and his team's safety was only his second priority.

Without so much as a second's consideration of a plan, Plague leveled his assault rifle at the hunters and began spraying them with fire. It was almost completely pointless, as the heavy armor they wore could withstand almost anything short of a head on rocket. However, Plague didn't have time to consider such things. He wanted to distract the hunters as quickly as possible.

His clip was nearly depleted by the time two of the huge enemies turned toward him. Both had charged fuel rod cannons, and both fired. Plague jumped, high into the air and toward them, carrying him over their heads and to the other side. He landed in the midst of the six, all of which now had their attention turned to him. The two fuel rod charges that had been aimed at him had detonated harmlessly a ways away.

He now, however, had gotten himself out of the frying pan, and into the fire. He had to face six angry hunters, all at close range. One advantage was his though. The two hunters that had fired at him were to his right, and had not yet been able to turn around. Almost as soon as he landed, he whipped out his pistol, and fired a number of rounds into the exposed flesh on their backs.

At least one round penetrated each of them, because they both fell, one off the edge of the catwalk. There were still four hunters behind him though, and this presented a major problem. He could practically feel the heat of their weapons on his back, even though he knew that his cybernetic armor made this impossible.

He heard the sound of one being fired, but even before that, he had stepped to his right, and off the side of the catwalk. The fuel rod charge raced past him on his left as he grabbed the edge of the thin walkway. He used his momentum to swing his body around the bottom of it, and come up, feet first, back on top. His heavy boots collided

with a Hunter's armored side, and knocked him off his balance, sending off the edge of the catwalk and crashing into a second story catwalk near Brute.

Three down, three to go. Plague spun a little and came to face the next hunter, who was about three yards away. The giant fired his weapon, and Plague rolled under the shot, toward the hunter. As he came out of his roll, he pulled out his sniper and literally jammed the skinny barrel through the small slot in the enemy's faceplate.

He pulled the gun back, and the Hunter fell in front of him, colorful blood oozing from the deadly wound. The next two hunters seemed determined not to be beat. They overlapped their shields, making it impossible to hit an exposed area with his sniper. These ones, he could see, would present a bit more of a challenge.

They both released their charged projectiles. One missed and went sailing down to the lower floors, but one came straight for Plague, and collided with his stomach, sending him flying back into the air. He flew back at an angle, so he fell off the catwalk. As he was falling, he realized that his shields had completely drained and that if he fell all the way to the first floor, he wouldn't survive.

He spun in the air to his right, and managed to grab hold of another catwalk. However, he couldn't conjure up the strength to pull himself up. Realizing he was holding on to a second level catwalk though, he simply dropped the short distance to the ground, and moved to the other side of the engine for cover as his shields recharged.

'**Brute**'

Like Plague, Brute watched, terrified as the green orb soared toward Wrench. Brute couldn't do a thing about it as the projectile detonated right on top of Wrench. A green smoke cloud blocked the damage from view, and Brute waited anxiously for it to clear. He didn't get to see if Wrench survived though, because right then, he saw his shield flare up and begin to drop as plasma fire splashed into his back. He spun around and realized that he hadn't been watching the door on his level. Five elites stood in the open doorway, two of which were gold and wielded plasma swords.

Brute had no time to waste checking on Wrench, he had his own problems. All three of the regular elite were rapidly firing their plasma rifles, while both gold elites charged him. One reached him first, and took a chest level swing at him. Brute ducked and kicked the elite in the side. His foot hit the elite's shields, sending him over the side of the catwalk, and down to ground floor.

The second one reached him a moment later, and by then the plasma fire had drained his shields. The gold elite brought his sword straight down through the air as though to slice Brute from head to toe. Brute however, sidestepped, grabbed the elite's sword hand, and pulled the enemy into a position between himself and the three elites in the doorway.

The gold elite struggled, but his strength was no match for that of Brutes, whose already great strength was amplified many times by his MJOLNIR battle armor. The three enemies' fire stopped as they figured

out the situation. Brute had hoped to kill the gold elite with their fire, but that had not happened. He had a backup plan though, he always did.

He forced the elite's hand back, breaking its arm, and slashed the sword across its chest, killing it. He then ripped the sword from its grip and charged at the remaining three elites. His plan was not very successful though, because as he ran, the sword, due to some fail-safe deactivate. His shields had regenerated, but only about halfway, so as the enemies opened fire, he ditched the sword and rolled a grenade into the doorway. They all screamed and in a crazy panic all tried to run different directions at the same time. Two of them collided, sending them onto the ground, essentially sealing their fate. The third attempted to retreat back into the tunnel, but tripped over his fallen comrades and he too was destroyed in the ensuing explosion.

Brute saw the bodies fly from the tunnel and out into the room and let out a sigh of relief. His shield had been drained yet again by their final burst of fire, and now he had a moment to let it recharge.

He only thought he did though, for hardly a second later, a hunter came falling from a higher lever, and crashed into the catwalk right next to him, ripping a giant gap in the walkway. The crash shook the catwalk, and sent him tumbling to the first floor after the now dead hunter.

After regaining his orientation and standing up, he realized that yet again he had another problem to deal with. For one Wrench, who had been on the first level, where Brute now was, was nowhere to be seen. Second, the gold elite that had gone off the edge earlier was standing only a few yards away, minimally injured, and looking as angry as ever.

Brute tried to grab his shotgun, but the elite hurled himself at him, knocking them both to the ground. The elite was on top, and raised his sword. Brute was too fast though, and he grabbed the elite's arm as it brought the weapon down. The blade was hovering half a foot above his face.

Again though, Brute's strength was not to be beat. He pushed the weapon up, and the enemy fell back and off of him. He took the little time he had bought to roll backward and into a crouch.

Again the elite charged, but this time Brute was faster. He pulled out his shotgun, and fired a round into its stomach. It was wounded, but continued toward him none the less. Brute could see that it was in agony just trying to keep running. The elite never had a chance after that.

Brute pulled the trigger, and another round pounded into its stomach. The blow sent it flying backward, its sword skidding across the floor. The weapon came to rest a few feet from its owner, and deactivated.

'**Wrench**'

Wrench watched in horror as the giant, green ball of energy hurtled toward him at an astonishing rate. He entered the unexplainable state

of Spartan time as everything around him seemed to race and move slowly at the same time. He had only a fraction of a second to think, and yet it seemed like he had all the time in the world.

He crouched, preparing for impact, then, just in time, jumped up and to his right, out of the way. The blast struck the ground below him, depleted his shields, and sent him flying up at an incredible speed. His angle brought him close to the huge covenant engine, and he grabbed onto an extruding device of some sort, planting his feet onto the side of the massive structure.

He quickly looked around and assessed the situation. The blast had sent him flying up to the third floor, where he was now clinging to the engine. Looking up, he saw Plague on a fourth floor catwalk engaging a number of hunters. Below him, Brute fought a group of elites on the second story.

Deciding that Plague needed his help a lot more, he attempted to push off of the engine and jump to the catwalk where Plague was now facing only four of the original six hunters. However, Wrench's jump fell short, and though he stretched his arms, his fingertips only brushed the edge of the catwalk. He fell a short distance, and landed on a third level walkway.

He looked up, and saw a hunter fall off the walkway above him, and go crashing through another below him. He knew that it was a good sign, but figured Plague could definitely use his help. His suspicion was confirmed when he heard a fuel rod charge detonate above him, then saw Plague fly off the walkway, and down to the lower levels.

Wrench hesitated for the first time on his mission. He was unsure of what to do. For one, his teammate, Plague, was most likely wounded; possibly seriously depending on how much of his shields had survived. The safety of the team was not his top priority though. His most important goal was the completion of his mission. However, thought Wrench, technically, destroying the hunters was not imperative to the completion of the mission.

It could affect the mission though, he decided. So he abandoned Plague for the time being, and jumped up, grabbing on to the edge of the fourth floor catwalk Plague had been on a second earlier.

Two hunters remained, both of which, had just fired their weapons, and so were not ready for any sort of mid to long range combat. The walkway was only wide enough for one hunter, so the first one charged at him while the second stayed back. Wrench guessed that it would prepare its weapon.

As the enemy ran toward him, it hunched forward and brought its shield up in a wide sweeping motion. Wrench jumped back, and threw a plasma grenade he had picked up earlier. The small explosive stuck to the hunter's exposed belly, and as it realized what was happening, it let out a deep roar, and stumbled back.

It came close to its teammate, but the other hunter took a step back to avoid him. The explosion engulfed the hunter in a blue ball of smoke. As it cleared, Wrench saw the green glow of a charged fuel rod cannon. The hunter fired, and for the second time in the last few minutes, a giant, green, plasma projectile came soaring toward him.

This one, however, he was prepared for. He jumped, and although it didn't completely spare him from all damage, his shields took the entire blow. They dropped to fifty percent as Wrench flew over the head of his enemy.

The hunter turned stupidly as he landed on the other side and proceeded to empty half of an assault rifle clip into its exposed back. By the time it had fully turned around, it was so weak, that Wrench was able to spray five rounds at its faceplate, and it fell forward, dead.

6. Chapter 6

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SIX**Â-

**0705 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis
System, Covenant Ship near Jericho III**

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'**Plague**'
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Plague waited for a few seconds as his shields recharged. He heard the familiar noise of their energy being brought up, and then checked his HUD and made sure they were fully charged. They were at 100, and he was ready to fight.

He spun around to the other side of the engine, where most of the battle had taken place. Leveling his assault rifle, he prepared to fire on any threat. He saw Brute standing in front of him, among the wreckage from a broken catwalk. Looking up, he saw Wrench peeking over the edge of a walkway on the fourth floor.

Catwalks wound this way and that way throughout the room, nearly every one covered with covenant blood. The remains of the battle showed just how powerful a small team of Spartans were. They were only 3 men, and they had completely destroyed six hunters, and a small group of other hostile ground forces, all within 5 minutes.

"We should get going," said Plague, "I'm sure they'll send more, and this time they won't be so few."

"You're right," replied Brute, "Besides we have to blow this thing soon."

"All the exits are on the second level, lets take the same one we came in through," suggested Wrench.

Plague flipped on his acknowledgement light, and proceeded to jump, grab a second level catwalk, and pull himself up. Wrench was already waiting at the door. Brute arrived a few seconds later.

Plague took point, and motioned for the others to follow him. He expected to encounter a lot more opposition getting back to the docking bay. Surprisingly they met little resistance until they were only a few rooms away from it. They came to a door at the end of a purple hallway, as was common in Covenant architecture. Plague moved toward it and it opened as most doors did, but the room was not empty

like most of the others they had entered.

There were at least ten elites, accompanied by a few jackals, and a large number of grunts. The room was large, and because of its circular design and many holopanel, Plague guessed that it was some sort of a control room, possibly for the docking bay.

He knew that if they moved into the room and engaged them at close range, the enemy would easily win. They had to find another strategy. He stepped back, out of the doorway, and made a fist to his teammates. They all lobbed grenades into the room at once, and the Covenant had no time to react. The explosions killed three elites, every one of the grunts, and all but two of the jackals.

Plague realized that his shields had been drained by the explosion and backed around the side of the door for cover. He saw that Brute already had his rocket launcher out, and within two seconds of the first explosion, one of his rockets created another. This one nearly swept the room clean of life. It left all but two elites standing, shields drained.

At that point, Wrench ran into the room. The elites fired, but all their shots missed wildly as they were disoriented from the explosions. Wrench simply fired a small burst into each of their chests, and they fell.

"That was close," said Plague, "everyone be sure to check their motion trackers more often."

Two acknowledgement lights blinked on.

"Alright," he said, "Let's go."

The rest of the journey was uneventful. They passed through a few more rooms, and two or three identical hallways, and finally came out onto the third story of the launch bay. However, the bay was not empty as they had expected.

The number of Covenant spread throughout the once empty launch bay certainly made up for the lack of hostiles on their way to it. Elites, jackals, grunts, and even a few hunters were everywhere, on every level. Shade turrets had been set up in multiple locations, and every single one of them was aiming their weapon right at the Spartans.

'**Brute**'

It seemed like eternity before either side opened fire. They all seemed to just stand there, staring at them, daring them to move. In reality, it took less than a second for the Spartans to react. Brute didn't bother looking to see what his teammates were doing. He dove behind a support pillar, and readied his rocket. Turning to his right he realized that there was a shade and a number of elites only twenty feet away that had clear shots at him.

The shade had already opened fire, and the elites followed soon after. As wave after wave of plasma washed over Brute's armor, his shields quickly dropped. He turned, fired, and prayed that he would survive.

The rocket flew straight toward the shade. The turrets fire ceased as the terrified grunt gunner attempted to abandon his weapon. He wasn't quick enough however, and the shade was destroyed, sending the grunt's dead body flying across the room. Two of the elites had survived the explosion though.

They continued their fire, and Brute's shields dropped dangerously low. He was running out of time. He adjusted his aim as quickly as he could, and fired again. There was a delay between the rockets, but after a second, the shell fired, and exploded on the wall a foot or two behind the elites. The splash damage killed them and threw them forward, causing one to land almost right on top of Brute. He quickly threw it off him, and looked around. There were no more hostiles that had a clear shot at him.

He took a second to glance to his left at his teammates. They too had both taken cover behind support pillars. Plague was peeking from around one of them and sniping. Brute knew he didn't have enough ammo to even take out the majority of the hostiles though, even if he managed a one shot kill for every one.

Wrench was leaning out then taking cover again every few seconds, firing his pistol. Brute opened a com channel, then realizing that it was pointless, as Plague's com was destroyed, closed it and just yelled, "What's the plan? There's no way we can take out all of them!"

"I know," replied Plague, "I'm not sure what we can do."

"All we need to do," said Wrench, taking cover again behind the pillar and reloading his pistol, "is get to that drop ship. If we can get there, its armor should stand up to their fire until I can get us out of here."

"Yeah," said Brute, "but the ship's on the first floor."

"That's an easy problem to solve. Wait here." said Wrench, and with that, he spun around the side of the pillar, and dropped to the first story.

Brute peeked over the edge and saw Wrench running toward the drop ship, trying to dodge incoming fire, and being partially successful. At the last second, he dove into the troop bay, and disappeared into the ship.

"Why won't he ever tell us what he's doing?" asked Plague.

"Just trust him," said Brute, "He's never failed before."

At that second, the drop ship's engines roared to life, and a second later, it was level with the third story and the troop bay door was open.

"That worked out well," commented Brute.

"Just get in," said Plague.

Both Spartans climbed into the troop bay, and attempted to close the door. The drop ship shielded them from most of the Covenant fire, but there were a few on the second story who still had a good shot.

"You get the door closed," Plague said to Brute, "I'll take them out."

Brute continued trying to close the door, but he just couldn't figure it out. He searched for some sort of panel or key pad, but there was nothing. All the sudden, the sound of the ship's engines changed tone, and the ship began to move, preparing to leave.

"Hurry!" yelled Plague.

"I'm trying!" said Brute, looking around unsuccessfully for the way to close the door.

He looked up, and Plague was reloading his rifle. The hostiles had been eliminated. Brute still didn't have the door closed, and the drop ship accelerated, banking slightly as it did. Both Brute and Plague were sent falling out of the drop ship. As Wrench's newly acquired ship flew away, they were left falling to the floor of the Covenant launch bay.

'**Wrench**'

Wrench accelerated the drop ship out of the launch bay, and into space. He tapped a control, and a camera view from the rear of the ship materialized out of thin air in front of him. The plasma cannons on the side of the Covenant ship behind him were beginning to glow. He prepared to maneuver his small vessel.

Half of the cannons fired, and deadly, super-heated plasma raced toward him and his stolen craft. He jerked the controls up, and made a half loop, putting his drop ship upside down in relation to the enemy ship. He looked around the cockpit for a second, and spotted a likely control. He activated it, and the plasma turret mounted on the underside activated. Wrench looked around for the controls to operate it then realized that it must be automatic.

Of course, that was useless as it wasn't programmed to be able to fire at the Covenant ship. He could change that though. He quickly tapped a series of controls, and a screen full of alien symbols appeared before him. He activated the translation software in his suit. It was limited, but it worked to decipher some of the strange calligraphy-like writing.

After a few seconds, he had it figured out, and he tapped a few of the symbols. For a second, nothing happened. Wrench realized that the turret was facing away from the ship. He quickly grabbed the controls and forced the ship into a half barrel roll. The turret, which he could see in a new camera view he had opened, now sprung to life, and began to fire at the large enemy ship as his small craft passed right over it.

There were only a small number of plasma cannons on the top of the ship, and they all charged as he flew past. A second later, they fired. Again, Wrench grabbed the controls, and violently sent the ship spinning downward, causing the first shot to miss. The second one, a ways behind the first, tracked his motion, and nearly hit him. However, he pulled up at the last second, and the plasma sped under him. The other shots were unable to keep up, and they were sent off in other directions.

Wrench looked around for a quick way away from the ship. If he stayed too close for too long, he would be hit eventually. He found a button that looked promising, and pushed it. The ship accelerated a great deal, and he was send speeding away from the hostile ship.

Unfortunately, as Wrench could see in the rear camera, the ship was turning, and preparing to give chase. He knew that his ship couldn't outrun it. However, now that he was a safe distance away, he had a plan.

He reached into one of the storage pockets on his belt, and withdrew a small device with two buttons, and a small slot. Attached to it with a thin chord, was a thin metal cylinder with one flattened end. Wrench inserted the cylindrical key into the slot, and held down one of the buttons. Looking up, he saw in the rear camera that the ship had turned to face him.

Without looking down at the device, he used his thumb to press the second button, and a moment later, the entire back portion of the ship exploded silently in the vacuum. He had remote detonate his stick bomb that he had placed inside the engine. It had worked.

With half the ship destroyed, and no means to move itself, the Covenant ship would slowly be sucked in by Jericho III's gravity. Soon, it would burn up in the atmosphere. However, Wrench reasoned, the Covenant could attempt to get their survivors off the ship using escape pods, or whatever the Covenant equivalent was.

So, he set a flight course that would take them into the atmosphere, and set them down a little ways away from where the ship would crash according to Wrench's hasty calculations. He could always adjust it later to make sure they weren't crushed by it.

After that, he got up and moved into the troop bay. He was surprised to find that neither Brute nor Plague was there and the hatch was open. He considered for a moment what could have happened. No. That wasn't possible, he told himself. He quickly closed and sealed the door, using control panel hidden in the wall.

After that, he checked the other troop bay, and discovered that they were not there either. At that point, he was forced to accept the reality of the situation. He had left without his team, having foolishly failed to check with them before leaving. He had left them trapped aboard the Covenant ship, in launch bay that was very close to the engine which he had just destroyed.

He had killed his own team. However, even worse was the fact that two Spartans had been lost on one mission, a record for sure, and they hadn't even been killed by the enemy. Their destruction was his fault, and now he knew he would never forgive himself.

7. Chapter 7

**CHAPTER

SEVEN**Â-

**0730 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis

System, Covenant Ship near Jericho III**

'**Plague**'

Plague watched helplessly as he fell from the drop ship down toward the floor of the launch bay. Wrench's small vessel accelerated out of the now open doors, and left them behind. He landed hard on the ground a moment later. His shields drained to 50, and he realized the seriousness of his immediate situation. He was surrounded by literally hundreds of Covenant, all of which had a clear shot at him. He had no way off the ship, and his shields weren't even fully charged.

As he was falling he had spotted a number of banshees on their level at the other side of the bay. They wouldn't do them any good however, because by the time they could get over there, they would be killed by the crossfire from the Covenant all around them. Standing there thinking didn't do them any good either, so Plague quickly looked around for another option. There was always another option. There was always a way to win.

He glanced behind him as the first of the Covenant opened fire, and he saw it. He saw the door Wrench had just flown out of. It was open, and that was his other option. That was his way to win.

He yelled over the incoming fire to Brute, "This way. Hurry!"

Brute turned and followed him as he ran toward the door, taking heavy fire as he went. His shields had just reached 0 as he came to the door. Without hesitating, he dove over the edge and into space. As he exited the launch bay, the gravity of the ship's hull kicked in, and he fell to the surface just outside the bay, below the door. Brute joined him a second later. For a moment, they both just lay there, against the hull, waiting for their shields to recharge, and catching their breath.

"What now?" Brute asked.

Plague removed a fiber-optic probe from one of the pouches on his belt. He plugged it into a slot in his helmet, and pushed it up and into the launch bay. He fed the video to Brute so that he could see what was going on as well.

Most of the Covenant were descending to the first level, and already, a number of elites were commandeering the banshees he had seen. That was it! The banshees. He pulled back the probe and disconnected, then stuffed it back in its pouch.

"The banshees," said Plague.

Brute's acknowledgement light blinked.

Plague peeked over the edge of the bay. The banshees were flying low and one was a few meters ahead of the others. Perfect, he thought, and prepared to jump. He waited for a second then hopped back up into the launch bay and jumped into the air, arms stretched above him.

His hand hit the wing of the lead banshee and he closed his fist. The flying vehicle yanked him out of the launch bay and into space. It

was imperative at this point that he didn't let go. If he did, he would be flung into space by the banshee's velocity, and eventually be sucked into Jericho III's atmosphere.

Plague used the 0 gee environment to his advantage, and swung his feet forward a bit. The momentum easily carried him up, and he slowly rotated to the top of the wing. He looked behind him and saw Brute on top of another banshee. However, all of the vehicles behind them quickly opened fire. They had to get in quickly or they'd be hit.

Plague brought his attention back to his banshee, and after looping his feet securely underneath its wing, used both hands to pull open the hatch. The elite inside look up at him in surprise as Plague grabbed his armor and threw him out of the cockpit, sending him flying out into space.

A second later, Plague was inside with the hatch sealed. The seat was specially designed to fit elite armor when in the lying down position, which made it very uncomfortable for Plague in his MJOLNIR Mark V battle armor. He wasn't worried about comfort at the moment though.

He turned the craft around and saw ten banshees heading straight for him. So he grabbed the weapons controls and opened fire. One banshee came very close to him, its wing smoking from his fire. Just before it passed, he fired the fuel rod cannon, and the giant, green projectile traveled through space for a millisecond before impacting head on with his enemy's vehicle. The smoking wreckage tumbled past him a moment later.

Just ahead of him, Brute was wreaking havoc with his fuel rod cannon, using the rapid fire plasma cannons between shots. Three destroyed banshees floated in the space around him.

One of the enemy craft broke out of the fight and headed toward Plague. It opened fire with the plasma cannons, and before Plague could react, it fired its fuel rod gun and the glowing, green ball of plasma came straight for him.

'**Brute**'

Brute watched as Plague was whisked off into space by the alien vehicle and paused for a moment before leaping up himself. He reached up and grabbed hold of another banshee as it passed through the air above him. Unlike Plague's banshee however, the pilot noticed what was going on and the hatch opened. The elite crouched in the open cockpit, and raised his plasma rifle. A second later, he opened fire.

The plasma tore through space, missing Brute at first then splashing across his shields. He quickly kicked his leg, sending him into a spin around the wing, which he held with one hand. As he came around the top, he kicked out, pushing against the wing to give himself more force, and caught the elite in the head. It was still gripping the controls of the banshee with one hand, and as it flew back out of the cockpit it jerked the controls and banshee was sent spinning back toward the ship.

Brute was on top of the wing now, and the elite was no longer

gripping the controls, but instead pulling himself onto the opposite wing. The banshee was still hurtling toward the Covenant ship. Brute knew that if they hit the shields they would both lose their grip and be sent flying randomly into space.

He didn't have to make the first move however. The elite foolishly launched himself toward Brute, fists first. Brute spun himself back around the bottom of the wing, and the elite simply passed him and, unable to stop himself in the 0 gees, continued on into space in the same direction.

Brute finished his spin and came to the top of the wing again. He was only a few meters from the ship. Without even getting in the cockpit, he grabbed the controls and steered away as fast as he could. The banshee's left wing scraped the energy shield of the ship, and the lower portion of the wing broke off.

Brute entered the cockpit and lay down in the uncomfortable seat. He glanced at the controls. He had flown a banshee before, and knew what most of them were. It didn't take him long to get the feel for it again.

He turned a little so that he was facing the main battle where Plague was, and accelerated toward it. As he arrived he surprised one banshee from behind and destroyed it with his fuel rod cannon. The wreckage of the ship was sent spinning into the blackness of space.

He turned and spotted more targets. He fired his plasma cannons and drew their attention to himself. As they turned he let loose another fuel rod, destroying one of them. Another flew straight towards him and fired its own fuel rod cannon. Brute rolled his banshee to the left and dodged it. He stopped half way through the roll, putting him upside down in relation to the enemy.

Quickly he flew forward and made a half loop, ending the maneuver directly behind his foe. The banshee tried to turn, but it wasn't fast enough. Brute fired his weapon once more and the vehicle was engulfed in a bright green light, emerging a second later only as blackened remains.

Brute finished off the last of the nearby banshees with a final fuel rod blast, sending the enemy ship tumbling backward toward Jericho III. He scanned the area to confirm the absence of any threats then turned his attention to Plague.

Plague's banshee came into view just as a fuel rod charge collided with it. There was a large explosion, and all that was left was the smoking wreckage of the alien fighter. Brute looked on in horror as he tried to comprehend what had happened.

Before he could do anything though, he saw a figure floating near the dead ship. It was Plague. He must have jumped out at the last second and pushed himself off of his craft. He was now floating quickly toward the ship that had destroyed it.

Before Plague reached it though, it turned and accelerated away, stopping a ways away, and turning toward Brute's ship. After a second's hesitation, it sped toward him firing its cannons. Brute could only hope that he would fare better than Plague.

First he dove down and under the ship, coming back up behind it and firing straight onto its exposed back. It turned though, and opened fire on him. It didn't have a chance. Brute had already launched his fuel rod, and as it began to fire, the deadly projectile hit, and sent it spinning into space, destroyed.

Brute scanned the area around him and quickly spotted Plague. He flew toward him and Plague grabbed onto the wing of the banshee. Brute knew that he could never hope to catch up to Wrench, so the logical thing to do was contact him via the com. He tried opening a link, but he only got static. Wrench was already out of range.

Brute couldn't talk to Plague in the vacuum because of the broken com, but hand signals still worked. Brute opened the hatch of the banshee so that Plague could see him, and pointed at his helmet, then in the direction Wrench was in. Then he made a slashing movement with his hand. Plague acknowledged with a shake of his head. Brute pointed toward the ship, then let his arm stretch out, pushing his hand forward. Plague acknowledged again, and Brute closed the hatch.

Brute trusted that Plague had tightened his grip, and accelerated the banshee back toward the Covenant ship. They had hardly gotten half way there, when the entire back portion of the ship exploded.

'**Wrench**'

Wrench thought for a moment about what to do. He had lost two teammates, but that didn't mean the mission was over. He had to continue. Grief could come later, the mission couldn't. The next objective would be fairly simple. He had to find the wreckage of the ship and make sure there were no survivors.

He sat down in the pilot's seat, then stood up again and pushed it away. It was much more comfortable standing, as the seat was designed for whatever creature usually piloted the vehicles, probably elites.

As he grabbed the controls and prepared to enter Jericho III's atmosphere, a com channel opened for a fraction of a second. Static played across the channel then it closed. Wrench froze. The channels were encrypted. No one could get in with perhaps the exception of an AI. It had to be a Spartan. The static just meant he was a little out of range.

Wrench immediately turned his ship around and headed back toward the damaged Covenant vessel. He tried opening a com channel, but apparently he was still out of range. He waited a minute, still heading toward the ship and tried again. It worked.

"Plague? Brute? Do you read me?"

There was static for a second, then a reply, "Wrench, this is Brute, and I have Plague with me. Pick us up at these coordinates."

A nav point appeared marking a point near the Covenant ship. Wrench accelerated toward it, "I'll be there in about two minutes." Then he cut the channel.

Two minutes later, he stopped the ship next to them and opened the troop bay door. Brute abandoned his banshee and both he and Plague pushed off of it and floated into the drop ship.

Wrench closed the door behind them. He almost opened a com link, but realized that Plague's was still broken, and the lack of atmosphere meant that external speakers wouldn't work either. Instead he resorted once again to hand signals. He pointed back toward the cockpit. His teammates understood and followed him there.

Wrench took his position at the controls and signaled to Plague and Brute that he was going into the atmosphere. Once far enough in, he could pressurize the ship and they would be able to talk once again.

As they neared the planet, Wrench adjusted their entry angle so that it wouldn't be too steep and sealed the ship to prevent damage to any internal parts. A second later they began the entry and the ship began shake. Wrench tapped a few controls and the ship became steady once again.

He opened a view to the left of ship and spotted the wrecked Covenant ship coming in at approximately the same time. That was both good and bad. It would be harder to tell where it would land, but they wouldn't have to wait on the ground and risk being crushed, a small risk, but a risk none-the-less.

However, a few seconds later, Wrench realized that neither of those things were relatively big problems. A small number of surviving plasma turrets on the ship were warming up. He hadn't considered the fact that their weapons system might have survived.

His reflexes kicked in, and he grabbed the controls. Three balls of heated plasma streaked toward their tiny craft and Wrench pushed it down as quickly as he could. Maneuvering was difficult however when in entry, and the ship hardly moved. It dipped a bit, but the plasma compensated and all three shots hit them dead on.

A warning flashed across the screen in the odd alien calligraphy. The main engine had been hit and disabled. Wrench no longer had any control over the ship. The controls locked up and everything died.

Wrench quickly stood up and ran to the troop bay, signaling for the others to follow. He immediately pulled the manual opening lever for the door, and it sprang up then tore off. Air flooded into the ship.

Wrench activated his external speakers and yelled over the air rushing by outside, "Follow me."

"What are we doing?" asked Plague.

"Just trust me. We don't have a lot of time," Wrench replied.

Plague and Brute both nodded. Wrench hoped that his quickly thought up plan would work. It would have to.

He reached his hand out of the ship as though to test the air. The

armor around his hand was quickly engulfed in flames from the friction of the air rushing by. The internal temperature of his armor rose a few degrees. If he exposed his whole suit of armor to that he knew he couldn't last long. That's why he'd have to do it as quickly as he could manage.

He reached his entire arm outside and grabbed onto something above the opening. Taking a deep breath, he swung himself outside and pulled himself onto the top of the ship. He looked back to make sure the others were with him. After a second, a hand came up and Plague pulled himself onto the top as well.

Wrench turned back around and began to move toward the back of the ship, carefully grabbing handholds so that he would not be swept up and away from the ship. He turned his head and glanced to the left. The covenant ship, still falling at about their speed, was warming up its turrets for another round of fire. This time, they wouldn't survive.

Wrench looked back again. Now Brute had made his way on top, and both of them were waiting to see what he would do. It was all up to him, and his plan would have to work. He couldn't fail.

He was now directly above the cockpit, and facing the energy field between the two troop bays. The two ghosts they had loaded on were still there. Carefully he crept forward, until he was at the edge of the ship. Slowly, he stood up, and after a second of contemplation, he jumped out toward the ghosts.

8. Chapter 8

* * CHAPTER

EIGHT**~~A-A~~

**0810 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis
System, Upper Atmosphere, Jericho III**

' **Plague' **

Plague watched as Wrench, engulfed in flames, jumped off of the drop ship and toward the small ghost. Because he, the ship and the ghost were all falling, he seemed to simply float across the gap and grab onto the ghost. Looking back, he signaled for Plague and Brute to follow.

Plague made his way to the edge of the ship and then he too, pushed off and glided over to the ghost. Wrench had already jumped to the second one, and Brute was right behind him. He took a seat in the ghost and prepared to turn it on. They were approaching the clouds now, and didn't have much time before they hit the ground.

Plague turned back and signaled for Brute to jump onto his vehicle. He did, and crawled around Plague so that he was on the front of the qhost.

Plague turned to look at the Covenant ship. Its weapons were charged, and once again it fired.

"Go!" yelled Plague, and he and Wrench both activated the ghosts

simultaneously. The anti-gravity of the two hovercrafts kicked in and both slowed significantly, making both the large and small ships seem to suddenly fall out from under them.

The plasma bolts that had been fired a second earlier struck the drop ship, setting fire to and destroying it. They had activated the ghosts just in time. Below them, the large Covenant ship passed through the clouds, along with the burning wreckage of the drop ship.

"We'd better get down there so we can see where it crashes," said Plague.

"Let's go," replied Wrench, and deactivated his ghost.

Plague did the same, and they both dropped quickly through the clouds. Far below, the ship was getting lower and lower. Finally, it crashed near the base of a small mountain, causing a massive amount of dust and smoke to be sent into the air, hiding it from view. A few seconds later, a swarm of small purple dots came rushing out of the dust cloud, and straight toward them.

"You've got to be kidding me," said Wrench, "Incoming banshees!"

"Brute," Plague said, "take the controls, I have work to do."

Brute didn't reply, but took the controls after Plague had climbed out onto the front of the ghost. He readied his sniper and peered through the scope. Three banshees were leading the pack, with at least another five behind them. It was a fairly large attack, and Plague planned on making it a bit smaller.

He targeted the lead banshee, and waited until he had a good shot. The flyer turned slightly to his right, exposing his side just a bit. Plague fired, and cockpit hinge on that side popped off. The cockpit cover raised up, having only one hinge in tact. A second later it broke off completely, leaving an exposed, but working banshee, and its surprised pilot. He didn't have long to ponder what had happened though, because Plague's next bullet found its way to his head, and his limp body slipped out of the flyer.

Plague aimed his rifle at a second one, but it rolled to the side and opened fire. He spun himself around and off the side of the ghost's wing, grabbing onto it so that he was below the ghost, which gave him a straight shot at the oncoming fighters.

Hanging on with one hand, he leveled his sniper with the other and zoomed in on the banshee, which had just come out of its roll. He aimed quickly and fired. The shot hit the left anti-grav pod and the flyer spun out of control and down toward the planet, which they were approaching rapidly.

They were now completely below the clouds, and only had a few seconds remaining. Plague pulled himself back up on top of the ghost so that he wouldn't be crushed upon impact. Looking around, he saw the remaining banshees approaching, and saw his chance. He bent his knees slightly, getting ready to jump.

"What are you doing?" yelled Brute.

"Change of plans," replied Plague, "I'll catch up with you guys later."

Neither Brute nor Wrench had time to reply before the lead banshee flew directly over Plague's head. He jumped, caught a wing, and pulled himself up so that he was hanging on underneath the banshee, using his feet on the back of the craft for support as well.

His weight forced the banshee to dip lower, and it fell to only a hundred feet or so above the ground. Plague knew that he could easily survive that fall without any major injuries. He pulled out a plasma grenade and activated it, then stuck it to the bottom of the banshee.

As quickly as he could, he released his grip and pushed himself off of the banshee and toward the ground. He watched the flyer as he fell. It continued for a second then burst into a giant ball of blue plasma.

He turned his head and looked down, and the ground came up to meet him very quickly. His forward momentum carried him further though, and he slid through the dirt for twenty feet before finally coming to a stop right in front of a hunter, with its gun charged and aimed at his head.

'**Brute**'

Brute watched with shock as Plague jumped up and caught the wing of the passing banshee. He wished he could have seen what he planned to do next, but the situation at hand was more important.

He gave his attention to the remaining five banshees, which were still a very immediate threat. They had all opened fire, and Brute had not problem doing the same. However, being in a ghost, he couldn't maneuver very well or dodge any fire, which meant that if he just continued to spray them with fire, they would win.

He couldn't allow that. There is always a way. There is always a way, but not this time. He had not cover, not additional fire powerâ€¦

Wait! That was it, fire power. That was what would turn the tide. He released the controls, stood up, and brought out his rocket launcher. He wished he could have had a nice target tracking feature, but unfortunately that was still in the development phase at some top secret UNSC weapons research facility. He would have to make do with what he had.

He took careful aim, a difficult thing to do when being splashed with plasma fire, and fired. The banshee, which was very close by now, tried to roll but wasn't fast enough.

Brute adjusted his aim, but lowered his rocket after realizing a better option. One banshee flew over him, and he readied and threw a plasma grenade. It stuck, and a few seconds later, the destructive fighter was a harmless pile of falling debris.

There was only one banshee left because Wrench had taken out two just using his ghost's weapons. The last one would be easy. He adjusted

his aim and fired another rocket. This banshee attempted to dive out of the way, but the rocket clipped one wing, destroying one whole side of the vehicle. What was left simply fell to the ground.

Suddenly, Brute's ghost hit the ground. The shock forced him to his knees. That would certainly have killed any marine, but the Spartans weren't just any marine. That was why they were Spartans. That was the exact reason they were created. They were better, and they were better by far.

Brute stood up again, and reloaded his rocket launcher. He had landed no more than half a mile from the ship, but there was not sign of hostiles anywhere. Even with his enhanced vision, he couldn't see any in the distance.

"Well," said Wrench, as though having read his mind, "There's no one here. I guess we had better get to their ship."

"All right," replied Brute, "let's go."

It took them only just over a minute to run the half mile distance to the ship, a good time, even for a Spartan. They stopped a few hundred feet away though, and hid behind a few large boulders that had been turned up by the ship's crash.

"Well, we have no way to contact Plague, so we won't have a sniper to cover us," Wrench said.

"I have an idea," said Brute, "just do as I say."

Wrench blinked his acknowledgement light.

Brute peeked around the corner of the boulder. He could now see a few surviving Covenant patrolling the area. They were near the back of the ship, close to where the engines had detonated. The entire back portion of the ship was charred wreckage, and an easy entrance. They knew that the Spartans were there, they just didn't know where.

Looking around Brute spotted a Wraith mortar tank, still in working condition a few hundred meters away. If he could get there, he could use it to clear the way, and they could move into the ship if needed.

"I'm going to make a dash for that Wraith," he said, "Can you give me cover?"

"Why don't you use the ghost?" asked Wrench, motioning to a nearby ghost lying on its back.

"Too much noise. If I go on foot they won't notice me until I'm already half way there."

"How about a distraction?" asked Wrench.

"Works for me," Brute replied.

Brute took off, running for the Wraith as fast as he could. There was no hiding his dash. The tank lay in the direction of the downed ship,

so he was heading almost straight into the enemy. He ignored the squeals of surprised grunts, and the squawks of mad jackals, and focused all of his energy on running toward the tank.

An explosion sounded behind him. Brute could only imagine what Wrench was doing, but he hoped that it would work. It seemed to, because Brute made it almost all the way to the Wraith without getting hit. Now however, a group of three grunts standing in his path opened fire.

He quickly pulled out his shotgun and shot it in the face as he dashed by. With one swift motion he brought the butt of the gun down on the second's head, and ran past the third.

The remaining grunt was surprised that he had survived, and let out a high-pitched yell of victory. It was cut short however, by Brute's grenade, which he had dropped as he ran by. A second later, all that was left in the grunt's place was a small crater.

Brute was nearly to the tank when an elite seemed to come out of nowhere. It saw him, screamed, and quickly climbed into the tank. Brute stopped running, only about thirty feet from the tank, and stood almost perfectly still, not daring to move.

As he figured was inevitable, the Wraith fired, and a giant, blue projectile was launched toward him.

'**Wrench**'

As Brute took off running, Wrench quickly prepared his distraction. He flipped the ghost right side up and pulled out two frag grenades. He wedged the two grenades between the seat and the side of the ghost, and with his fingers through the loops on the pins, activated the ghost.

The vehicle flew forward and the pins were pulled out of the grenades, which remained safely in the ghost. A group of Covenant turned toward the noise to see the makeshift hovering time bomb flying straight for them. They tried to dive out of the way, and would have been successful had the grenades not been there. As the ghost passed by them, the grenades detonated, sending their bodies flying in all directions. The wreckage of the ghost continued on for a few meters, sliding along the ground, then stopped.

It had worked perfectly. Nearly all of them had been killed, and now other groups of enemies were running toward the spot at which the ghost had exploded. The best part was that none of them knew where he was or what had caused it. Not for long though.

Wrench stepped out from behind the boulder and fired his assault rifle a few of the approaching Covenant. That gave away his position to them, but that was just what he wanted. As they came closer, he began to climb up and over the rock.

By the time they got around it to the spot where he had been, he was on the other side, unnoticed. The boulder was massive, but he knew he could roll it easily. His enhanced strength was many times that of a normal man.

With a little effort, he rolled it and heard a number of cries from

the other side. Apparently his plan had worked. However, he still had to deal with the survivors. They came around both sides of the boulder, three elites and a number of grunts. It wasn't anything too big.

By the time the first elite had a clear shot of him, he had his pistol in the air, and the elite walked right into it. Wrench shot at point blank, and the bullet penetrated the enemy's shields then skull. It let out a short, startled scream and fell to the ground.

Two more elites were behind him. One tried to hit him in the back, but he side stepped and it brought its rifle down through the air next to him. Wrench grabbed the weapon and twisted the elite's arm breaking it.

The other elite began firing into his back, but he quickly spun around, still gripping the other elite's arm, and forced it between himself and the fire. The broken-armed elite took a number of shots in the chest before his ally let up. It was too late though, he was already dead, and Wrench let his body slip to the ground.

He was still holding the elite's plasma rifle though, and he brought that up and fired. The elite dodged it and rolled behind the boulder. A second later however, he came around the other side. Apparently he had learned his lesson when Wrench had crushed his buddy earlier.

Again the enemy used melee tactics. Wrench easily dodged it, but this time it was a pulled attack. The elite did not follow through, and so was able to pull back and fire directly into Wrench's faceplate.

Wrench spun to the side, moving out of the fire, and pushed his elbow back, catching his opponent in the side. The elite yelled and stumbled back. Wrench drew his pistol once again, and before it could come back at him he shot it in the face and it too fell.

The grunts were already running away. Pathetic, Wrench thought, and proceeded to pick them off one at a time.

9. Chapter 9

**CHAPTER
 NINE**

**0820 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis
System, Jericho III, unknown location**

' **Plaque' **

Plague lay on the ground looking up at the hunter. It had its charged fuel rod cannon aimed right at his head, and Plague looked up at it, thinking about what to do. Time seemed to slow down, and it seemed like everything was still and silent.

In reality, it took Plague a fraction of a second to react. He rolled out of the way and threw his feet up over his head, hitting the hunter's gun and knocking it to the side just as it fired.

The plasma hit the ground and detonated a few feet away. Even so, Plague's shields dropped dangerously low. He couldn't take another shot like that. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like he had a choice. As he rolled the rest of the way up and to his feet, he remembered that hunters always traveled in pairs. This was no exception. Behind the first mammoth alien was a second that now had its gun charged and aimed at him.

Plague knew that it was about to fire, and if he was hit, even by splash damage, he didn't have much of a chance of surviving. Fortunately for him, he didn't have to take the shot. He knew somebody else who would. Before the hunter could fire, Plague dove to his right. The enemy adjusted his aim without thinking and fired.

The hunter immediately saw his mistake, but by then it was too late. Plague had dived right behind the other hunter, and the large, green plasma projectile was now headed straight for it. The make-shift shield saw it coming and tried to duck, but was far too tall. The plasma bolt hit him right in the face, and he fell over after a violent, green explosion.

Plague easily dodged the falling body and crouched next to it, sniper rifle ready. The hunter that had fired let out a roar and charged straight for Plague. Despite the hunter's large mass, Plague was not worried, because the attack was a foolish one. He rolled to the side and the hunter passed him and began to turn around. Before it could, Plague had fired his rifle at the exposed skin on its back. Unfortunately, the bullet only grazed the enemy, and only really served to enrage his opponent further.

The hunter turned and swung his arm out, using the huge metal shield as a deadly club. Plague ducked and the weapon passed above him harmlessly. However, the barrel of his rifle stuck up into the air, and as the hunter swung its arm the gun was knocked out of his hands and skidded through the dirt, coming to a stop a number of yards away. Plague drew his pistol, trying to think of a way to get the hunter to expose its weak points.

At this point the beast was clearly enraged at having his brother slain and his prey surviving for so long. It stepped back and charged its gun again. This actually wasn't in the hunter's best interest, as it gave Plague time to reposition and manipulate the situation. Plague strafed to his right. Slowly at first, allowing the hunter to easily follow him with its weapon, which was now fully charged.

Suddenly, at the exact moment the hunter decided to fire, Plague sprung forward and flew over the ball of green plasma toward the hunter. It let out a deep, surprised grunt as a ton and a half of armored Spartan came flying at him with unexpected agility.

The fuel rod charge detonated harmlessly behind Plague as he launched himself at his enemy, pistol held out in front of him. He jumped clear over the hunter, and as he passed over it, his enemy looked up at him. As this happened, Plague pulled the trigger and the pistol discharged into the hunter's face.

He landed on the opposite side of his finished opponent, and didn't

bother to look back as he heard the metal armor scraping against itself and the heavy thud of the beast falling to the ground.

After picking up his sniper rifle Plague looked around for Brute and Wrench, but saw no sign of the ghosts, either falling or on the ground. He turned around and looked toward the crashed ship. He couldn't see much due to a small hill standing in his way. Suddenly there was a distant crash and a little dust cloud rose up on the other side of the hill. That was them. The ghosts had hit the ground, and they would need his help.

It was only about a quarter of a mile to the hill, a distance that Plague managed to cover in about a minute. Upon his arrival, he pulled out his sniper rifle and peered through the scope. There was a boulder not too far from the ship, on top of which he saw Wrench.

Wrench dropped down the other side just as a group of Covenant made their way around it, to find no one there. Plague laughed to himself. He knew what was coming. A moment later, the boulder rolled toward them, and an elite and grunt were crushed under it. The rest jumped back away from the rock.

Plague looked in a slightly different direction. There Brute was running full speed toward a Wraith tank. Three elites noticed him and began running toward it as well. As far as Plague could tell Brute still had no idea they were there. He was just focusing on running.

Plague decided that he could help him out, and took aim. The first elite fell easily. The others were aware of him now though. He fired off the second shot before they could do much, and it grazed the shoulder of the second elite. One more shot brought him down.

The final elite was nearly at the tank. Plague steadied his hand, took aim, and led the target. The elite was only a few feet away from the tank.

_Click. _He was empty. Plague swore under his breath and reloaded as quickly as he could. By the time he had regained his aim however, the Wraith had been manned. Brute stood nearby, having realized the actuality of the situation.

'**Brute**'

Brute dove toward the tank as the shot came closer. It passed right over him as he was in the air. Static sounded over his radio and his shields dropped a little. The blue mortar detonated behind him, bringing his shields down to nothing.

He knew that he couldn't take any more damage, so he rolled repeatedly toward the tank. The auto-cannons activated and angled down, but he was faster and managed to get nearly under the tank. At that second it accelerated and passed over him, turning around a number of yards away, and opened fire with the auto-cannons again. Brute's shields were still down, and now, lying on the ground, directly in the line of fire, he didn't stand a chance.

Suddenly, there was a loud shot from far off, and one of the auto-cannons fell off with a small explosion. The trail of a sniper

bullet faded in the air near the tank. A second later another shot rang out and the second turret fell off. Brute let out a sigh of relief. He wasn't out of the woods yet though. The tank fired its main cannon now, and for the second time in the past minute, a giant blue projectile came hurtling toward him.

Time seemed to slow down and speed up simultaneously. He had once again entered Spartan time. As the plasma mortar arched through the air, Brute tried to think of something to do. Simply jumping out of the way would not work, as with his shields down the splash damage would surely kill him. He didn't seem to have any choice.

He heard the whir of a ghost's engine and immediately and hopefully stuck his hand into the air.

Wrench passed over him in a ghost and reached down to grab Brute. He was whisked off of the ground for a second, and then slammed hard back into it a few meters farther along. Wrench's grip broke and Brute skidded a few more feet through the dirt.

As he came to a stop he lifted his head and saw the mortar explode right where he had been a second before. He thanked both Wrench and Plague silently and stood, preparing to once again face the tank.

By the time it had turned to face him, his shields had fully recharged. So, apparently, had its weapons, as it fired another mortar upon spotting him. This one, however, was much easier to dodge. Brute ran toward the tank at a diagonal so as to avoid the explosion. He did so easily.

By the time the tank was ready to fire again, Brute was too close for it to be effective. So, the driver resorted to a secondary means of killing. He tried to run Brute over. The driver accelerated toward him, giving Brute less than a second to react.

Of course, that was plenty of time for a Spartan with enhanced reflexes. Brute quickly dropped to the ground and as the tank passed over him, he rolled onto his back and stuck a plasma grenade to the bottom of it, right under the engine.

The tank stopped a few yards away, now at an effective range, and turned back toward Brute. Just as it came about, there was an explosion on the bottom of the tank, and the vehicle fell out of its hover and to the ground.

The pilot opened up the hatch on top and began to climb out, screaming in his alien tongue. He wasn't half way out when a sniper bullet found his head and fell back into the tank.

'**Wrench**'

Wrench turned back toward Brute to make sure he was okay. He was getting to his feet and moving toward the tank once more.

Wrench considered using the ghost to help him, but figured that he could take the tank on his own. He turned his attention to the large hole in the ship, where a group of grunts peeked around a corner, looking out onto the battlefield.

He accelerated toward them and they all screamed as they saw him coming. He opened fire and took most of them down before he was even there. The remaining few became road kill as he easily mowed them down. One last grunt ran screaming back into the ship, but Wrench fired on last burst of plasma and he too fell face first into the dirt.

Wrench got out of the ghost and looked out toward Brute and where he could just barely make out Plague in the distance. Brute had finished dealing with the tank, and Plague began running in toward him. In less than a minute they were all together again discussing their next move.

"There's only one last thing to do," said Wrench, "We just have to make sure that none of the covenant can make it off the planet."

"We're going to have to make it off the planet ourselves though," said Plague, "but as of right now we don't have any kind of vehicle."

Suddenly there was a burst of static over the com, and a new voice joined the conversation.

"Spartans, this is Captain Rander of the ship Manassas. We never received a report from you via the long range comm. in your pelican. I was sent to help."

"We can certainly use some help," said Brute, "starting with a ride."

"I'll get right on it," the commander replied, and the comm. link was cut.

"That was good timing," said Wrench.

"No doubt," replied Plague, "but we're still going to have to get rid of the rest of the covenant."

"True," said Wrench, "but let's not worry about that until we evaluate the situation and find out what the Admiral's got on his ship."

"Good idea," said Brute.

Suddenly a loud scream filled the air. An elite in gold armor wielding an energy sword charged from out of nowhere. This opponent was formidable. Spartans were almost never snuck up on. Wrench drew his pistol and back away. He saw Brute bringing out his shotgun and moving closer, while Plague also drew his pistol.

The elite slashed the sword at Brute and he dodged it easily, simply spinning to one side. As he did so he grabbed the handle of the sword and attempted to wrench it from the alien's grasp. The elite fought back however, and managed to force a stalemate. This elite was very strong indeed if he could match Brute's strength, thought Wrench.

It didn't last long though, as Plague fired a shot at the elite's head. The bullet ricocheted harmlessly off the shields, but it did its job. The elite was distracted for a moment, and Brute pulled the

weapon away from him. The elite drew a plasma rifle, and rolled backward, away from Brute.

Brute gripped the plasma sword but the failsafe kicked in and it deactivated, rendering itself useless, almost. Brute instinctively threw the handle at the elite. It hit him square in the face and the elite screamed and stumbled back. Brute fired a round from his shotgun into it and its shield flared up then died.

Wrench took the opportunity now and fired his pistol directly at the elite's head. The bullet hit its mark and passed straight through, bringing a spray of purple blood out of the other side with it. The elite's scream continued and then cut off as it sank to the ground.

10. Chapter 10

****CHAPTER**

NINE**Â-

****0830 Hours, January 26, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis System, Jericho III, unknown location****

'Plague**'**

Plague could see the approaching drop ship as it came closer and prepared to land. A light anti-aircraft gun had been mounted on the back, and was manned by a marine. He swung back and forth, looking for a target. The Spartans however, had done a good job of eliminating the enemy forces in the area. The pelican came to a hover nearby and slowly lowered to the ground. The marine released the gun, jumped down and jogged over to them.

"We don't have much time left, so we brought you guys a few supplies to help finish your mission," he said.

"What do we have to work with?" asked Plague.

"The pelican, its LAAG, a couple of plasma grenades, three sticks of C10, and a Fury tac-nuke," the marine replied.

Brute looked at the marine, "I think we can come up with something."

"Good," he said, "let's move then."

The four of them entered the troop bay of the pelican. Brute operated the gun, and the pelican lifted into the air.

Usually the Spartans would converse silently over their suit's radios, but they couldn't this time due to Plague's damaged armor. They had no choice but to allow the marine to overhear everything. He gave no sign that he heard anything though. He sat there looking around, not daring to meet their eyes. He couldn't even tell if they were looking at him anyway.

The pilot set the pelican down on a hill a little ways away from the crash site. When it had settled on the ground, the cockpit door opened and he stepped into the troop bay.

"I'm your pilot, Chris," he said, "Do we have a plan?"

"Yes," replied Plague, but it may take some complicated piloting on your part."

"What do want me to do," he asked sarcastically, "fly inside the covenant ship?"

"Yes," said Plague in a serious tone, "That' exactly what we want you to do."

'**Brute**'

Brute held his rocket in one hand, and the Fury tac-nuke in his other. It was only slightly larger than a football, but considerably heavier. Plague couldn't snipe well at close quarters, so he had his assault rifle ready. Wrench was holding both his and Brute's pistols, one in each hand. It would be nearly impossible to reload with one hand however, so he planned on discarding one before too long.

The pelican moved slowly as it entered the gaping hole in the enemy ship's side. The entire interior of the back of the ship had been blown apart, creating a hollowed out space.

The pelican turned toward a large room near the side of the hole. It must have been for ground vehicle storage because it was a large room with a large door at one end. The pelican maneuvered carefully into the space and began making its way through the damage portions of the ship.

A com channel opened and the pilot's voice came over it, "There's a group of covenant up ahead."

"Good," said Wrench, "stop here and hover."

The vehicle came to a stop, and the Spartans could here the covenant talking to each other only a few yards away.

"Okay," said Plague, "now turn us around."

The pelican slowly turned so that the troop bay was facing the covenant. Brute was on the turret, and before any of them could do a thing, two grunts were dead, and an elite's shields were drained.

The rest of them took cover behind some nearby storage crates. Wrench however, hopped out of the pelican and tossed a grenade over. There were a number of loud cries and roars, and an explosion. Two elites and another grunt came flying out from behind their cover, their limp bodies crashing into a wall across the room. At the same time, a door opened and out came a pair of hunters.

The first one already had his cannon charged, and fired straight at the pelican. The Spartans all made it out in time. The marine however, screamed and covered his face as he and the turret were engulfed in a green ball of plasma.

Behind the two hunters, a stream of elites began pouring out of the doorway. Not even three Spartans could hope to win against such

impossible odds. Another pair of hunters entered the room, and other doors began opening, spilling more covenant into the room. Surely this was where they would die.

Wrench turned to Plague as the enemies began to move in on them. "You and Brute arm the nuke, I'll hold them off."

"No way," said Brute, "we all get out together."

Plague looked around; there was no way Wrench would survive. "Negative, soldier," Plague said to Wrench, suddenly getting very serious, "My whole team gets out alive!" Even as he said this, he thought back to something he had learned in his training.

"Your duty to the UNSC supersedes your duty to yourself or your team, and sometimes, you must spend the lives of those under your command to fulfill that duty."

Plague couldn't see Wrench's face, but he could sense his emotion none the less. The Spartans' bonds were so strong that they could practically read each other's minds.

"Very well. Go now," said Plague, "and die honorably in battle."

Wrench grinned under his visor, and knew that Plague could sense it. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he said.

Wrench

He turned away from Plague and toward the massive group of covenant. They all froze, waiting for him to make a move. The whole scene seemed to stand still. Brute and Plague watched as Wrench prepared for his final battle.

Wrench reached up and removed his helmet, revealing his face and short, dirty blonde hair. A couple of the grunts chattered confusedly amongst themselves. He brought up both of his hands, dual wielding his pistols, and letting out one, last battle cry, charged into the enemies firing his weapons wildly.

He broke the enemy lines and dropped his empty pistols. He pulled out his fully loaded assault rifle and squeezed the trigger. A second later, an elite jumped on top of him, and he was engulfed in a mob of angry covenant.

Plague

Hurriedly, Plague assisted Brute in arming the nuke. It took less than ten seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. Finally it was armed and rigged to blow in two minutes. A countdown appeared on his HUD as he turned back toward the pelican.

Chris was standing in the troop bay, staring at Wrench fighting the covenant.

"Hurry!" Plague said, "Get us out of here."

"Whâ€|" Chris began, pointing toward the third Spartan who was fighting futilely against impossible odds. Blood was dripping down

Wrench's face. One eye was black and shut. He had burns all over his face, and portions of his armor were falling off. His shields had been permanently damaged and weren't recharging. He stared at them and mouthed, "Go." Then he fell to the floor and a pool of blood appeared on the ground by his head.

Chris stumbled back into the cockpit. A second later the pelican's engines roared to life. Plague and Brute were in the troop bay watching the covenant rushing toward them. There was no way Chris would get them out in time.

Through the mob of enemies, however, Plague caught a glimpse of Wrench. He had a small access panel open on his armor. He was still alive, and Plague knew what he was about to do.

All of a sudden, an explosion radiated out from Wrench and all of the covenant were thrown into the air. Pieces of debris caught on fire and the room glowed a deathly orange as the flames rose. Wrench's body could not be seen in the wreckage.

The pelican rose into the air and flew forward, leaving the covenant to burn and die with Wrench. Plague's countdown timer read 1 minute.

Plague shouted into the cockpit, "You'd better get us out of here fast or were all going to be dead!"

"I've got to be careful," shouted Chris, "if I clip a wing off of this thing, we'll never get out."

Plague sat down impatiently. Once again he was placed in a position with no control. His life was in the hands of a pilot he hardly knew.

****30 seconds.****

The pelican shook. Chris swore and shouted back to them, "I hit something. I'm going to try to divert power to the damaged wing to try to balance us out."

"Do it quickly!" yelled Plague.

****15 seconds.****

Plague could see the opening in the side of the ship. They were almost there.

****10 seconds.****

They were out. Now all they had to do was put distance between them and the ship. Plague hoped it would be enough.

****5 seconds.****

Plague's countdown timer started beeping to indicate the time.

****3 seconds.****

****2.****

The ship exploded in a brilliant flash of light and Plague's visor adjusted, then returned to normal as it died down. Heat swept over him, and his armor's internal temperature rose then fell as his suit cooled. They had just made it.

11.
Epilogue

**0600 Hours, February 12, 2535 (Military Calendar)/ Lambda Serpentis
System, UNSC destroyer _Resolute_, in orbit above Jericho
VII**

Plague's pelican docked on the destroyer and he and his red team piled out. All of them were silent. They had just lost the planet to the covenant, and the whole system with it, despite their recent victory at the theater of operations.

Plague went to the armory to store his weapons, and picked up a view screen. He opened a camera view of the planet. The covenant ships were surrounding it, systematically boiling it's oceans and making sure that every last inch was turned into a hard, glass-like material.

He had seen this done numerous times, but for some reason, he wanted to watch it again. He knew of course, that the ship would jump out of the system on a randomized vector, and make a series of random jumps before heading back to either Earth or Reach. He wouldn't get to see the whole thing.

However, after a couple minutes, he realized that they weren't going anywhere. He wasn't sure why, but he was glad. There was something that he had to see. For some reason he wanted to see that it was gone.

Wrench had died to save that planet, and it was hard to accept that he had died for nothing. However, in the few weeks since, nearly all of the civilians in the system had been evacuated. Had Wrench not given his life, covenant reinforcements would have arrive much more quickly, and there wouldn't have been time for an evacuation.

Wrench had died for something, even though they hadn't won in the end. Perhaps even in war, winning wasn't everything.

End
file.